

# We Will Never Leave A Fallen Comrade

## The February 8th Lighthorse MEDEVAC Mission



### **Cloud covered ridgelines during the February 8th MEDEVAC Mission**

In combat, there is never a day off. On the 8<sup>th</sup> of February 2010 weather in the Kunar Province of Afghanistan was extremely poor. Looking out from the flight line, it was easy to see that it wasn't a flying day as it was difficult to see much beyond the airfield perimeter, let alone the enormous mountains that typically dominate the normal scenery. Thick fog and an even thicker cloud deck had cancelled all the days' missions, keeping Task Force Lighthorse's steeds on the ground. However, that would soon change.

At approximately 0810, the TF Lighthorse TOC received a 9-line MEDEVAC request for an urgent medical evacuation of a patient after FOB Blessing, an outlying base in the Pech Valley, had suffered casualties from an indirect fire hit on their gym. Observed weather in vicinity of Jalalabad was below 700 foot cloud ceilings and visibility was less than 2 miles, making for a risky flight in such mountainous terrain. Complicating the situation further, FOB Blessing was in the Pech Valley, which was a high threat area due to constant enemy activity. To launch a mission in such bad weather conditions required approval from the Aviation Brigade Task Force Commander. After the mission update brief in the TOC, the air mission commander, CW2 Jeff Roberts asked to attempt to make the pickup of the severely injured Soldier saying, "Just let me try. We can do it." After discussing the situation and the options with the Brigade Commander, the TF Commander, LTC von Eschenbach, was given permission

to launch. The first-up MEDEVAC crew, along with their UH-60 Blackhawk chase crew and the AH-64 Apache day quick reaction force (QRF) ran to their respective aircraft to launch. All four helicopters took off and quickly disappeared from the sight of those watching as they flew into the rain and fog.

The weather encountered was worse than forecasted with visibility conditions of less than  $\frac{3}{4}$  of a mile and the cloud deck right at 500 feet above ground level (AGL). As the flight attempted to push forward, it became very difficult to maintain sight of each aircraft in the formation. Despite knowing that the fate of the injured Soldier relied heavily on their shoulders, the crews made the hard decision to abort the flight and return back to the airfield quickly, reporting back to the TOC to reevaluate their options and the situation.

The air in the TOC was tense as reports from the outlying station conveyed that the injured Soldier's health was beginning to deteriorate. A course of action to evacuate the Soldier on ground ambulance was being considered, but the enemy situation and the condition of the only road in the Pech Valley made for extremely dangerous travel to the nearest level II medical facility in Asadabad. With weather conditions continuing to deteriorate, an option to launch just one Apache with the UH-60 MEDEVAC was considered. When asked what he thought, CW2 Jeff Roberts, without hesitation, said that he was ready to try it again. CW3 Brandon Gress and CPT Tony Marston, the Apache crew who had been on the initial attempt, also volunteered to go out again as the MEDEVAC aircraft's armed escort. Left to make yet another difficult decision, LTC von Eschenbach discussed the new plan and his upmost trust in his aircrews with the TF Falcon Commander, COL Galli. After receiving approval for the second launch, the

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aircrews took off again in an attempt to rescue the injured Soldier in the Pech Valley. The flight, consisting of the Pirate Dustoff MEDEVAC crew and the AH-64 Assassin crew, were quickly swallowed by the fog as they barely left the airfield runway.

The weather had deteriorated further, this time with the visibility barely at  $\frac{1}{2}$  mile and the cloud deck now at 300 feet AGL. Both CW2 Roberts and CW3 Gress masterfully flew their aircraft in a close formation with their respective crewmembers doing the best they could to provide obstacle clearance and avoidance. Initial movement was slow as the aircraft moved towards the site at slow airspeeds. After five minutes of flying, which seemed like an eternity, the aircraft approached the mouth of the Konar Valley where the weather began to slightly improve. The flight increased its speed and continued north to the Pech Valley, opposed by a steady rain and low cloud layers. As the MEDEVAC crew entered the Pech and began to fly west, they learned that a ground evacuation had begun and the crew would have to link up with the patient at another combat outpost to the east of FOB Blessing. As the crew began its descent to COP Michigan, the Apache stayed overhead providing security as the patient was received in by the Lighthorse Flight Surgeon, CPT Hauser and the flight medic, SPC Blansett. Once onboard with the medical providers maintained the fragile condition of the Soldier as the pilots flew back through the terrible weather conditions to make it back to Jalalabad Airfield.

Despite the failed first attempt, the process that ensued afterward, and the decrease in the weather conditions, the Lighthorse crews were still able to complete the medical evacuation mission safely in 62 minutes. The injured Soldier's condition was reevaluated at the Jalalabad level II medical facility and was assessed that he would need to be transferred to the Combat Support Hospital at Bagram Army Airfield. This would present another challenge as the

standard flight routes to Bagram were also affected by the bad weather and had kept all rotary air traffic from moving for the last three days. Knowing that the life of the Soldier was still in question, both aircrews volunteered to conduct another movement through extremely challenging conditions. CW2 Roberts briefed an aerial route, based on his previous flight experience in the area from his last combat tour with the 82<sup>nd</sup> Combat Aviation Brigade's 2<sup>nd</sup> Battalion; they would take a route away from the typical path to circumvent the fog filled valleys. After obtaining permission to launch yet again, the Dustoff and Assassin crews departed. The weather conditions had not improved at all, forcing the flight to initially use the river and CW2 Robert's knowledge to navigate through the terrain. Conditions would improve temporarily, only to decrease again in the valleys, forcing the flight to find new ways ahead. A thick fog surrounding Bagram was the last obstacle to be encountered, but even it could not stop the determined crews. At a ½ mile out, the large runway lights finally came into sight. Moments later, the TF Lethal Soldier was transferred to a ground ambulance to receive the treatment he needed. The Lighthorse crews would fly back to Jalalabad Airfield that day, reassuming a medical evacuation and quick reaction force posture, ready for the next mission that might come their way.

Words to describe the valor displayed during the mission are hard to come by, but the TF Lighthorse Command Sergeant Major, CSM Lemke, best captured the event in an email sent out afterwards.

*"Today we saved a life. The family of the Soldier that was snatched from the hands of death in the Pech Valley will never know. Rightfully so, it is not within our character to boast. They will never know that, we too, value their Son as if we were Family and so much more. We are him. We will never leave a fallen comrade."*

It is rare that the MEDEVAC crews get to meet those that they save but in April, the Soldier's life that had depended on the bravery of the Lighthorse crews that February day, made a surprise visit to the MEDEVAC and Apache aircrew command post. The crews of the Pirate



**Aircrews flying over Sarobi Lake prior to entering a cloud filled valley on the return trip from Bagram**



**SSG Michael James talking with the Dustoff and Assassin crews**



Dustoff and Assassins from that fateful day were able to shake hands with the Soldier they had rescued. SSG Michael James, whose condition had improved and who had even begun working back at FOB Blessing again, was able to meet and talk to his saviors. SGT Blansett explained that *“it is rare to meet the Soldiers that we remove from the battlefield. It makes the job that much more meaningful. It feels as though we do make a difference.”* Everyone shared their memories from the day, the events that had transpired, and how

the 8<sup>th</sup> of February had affected them. For all of those present, the meeting with SSG James will be a constant reminder of why Task Force Lighthorse’s mission is so important and necessary. As CSM Lemke said, *“The amount of blood, sweat, tears, and energy put into today’s extremely high risk MEDEVAC mission would not fit into any earthly container. The heart of an American Soldier is the only thing big enough. I am honored to be part of the whole, for the whole will risk all for the part.”*